

Invention alerts ice anglers to fish on the line

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A couple of guys in Wisconsin have combined a tradition dating back at least 1,500 years with the Internet age.

Bob Baddeley and Brad Zdroik have invented and are marketing BlueTipz, a wireless transmitter that sends an alert to your smartphone when you have a fish on your ice fishing tip-up.

A tip-up is a piece of equipment that's placed across an ice fishing hole. When a fish bites, a spring-loaded metal arm with a flag attached pops up, letting the person know they have a fish on the line.

BlueTipz is a Bluetooth-enabled transmitter that attaches to the metal arm on the tip-up device. When the arm tips up, the transmitter sends an alert to a smartphone.

"The problem is that ice fishers have to be constantly checking their tip-ups to see if their flag is up. And if they take too long, their fish can get away or they can get a fine," BlueTipz says on its website.

"It makes it that much easier to monitor your tip-up," Zdroik said.

Baddeley and Zdroik developed BlueTipz almost by accident.

"I was looking for an injection molding company for a different project," Baddeley said. "I found this Chinese company and I wanted to vet them. So I asked them for a reference."

The Chinese company gave him Zdroik's name.

"So I called up Brad and was telling him about my project."

Baddeley had developed and was marketing portable electronic scoreboards for recreational sports. "The conversation just morphed into some other ideas that we had," including the idea for BlueTipz, Zdroik said.

"I had everything that I needed to be able to build a prototype in two weeks," said Baddeley, a computer engineer.

They then headed to northern Wisconsin to test the idea. It worked. Now they are trying to bring it to a bigger market.

"We're just introducing it," Baddeley, 31, said.

Big and growing market

The icefishing equipment market is estimated at \$241.3 million annually, according to the American Sportfishing Association. An estimated 6 percent of U.S. anglers went ice fishing in 2011, which is the latest year such data exist, according to a spokesman for the association. Do the math and that's just under 2 million of the 33.1 million anglers in the U.S.

There are an estimated 500,000 ice anglers in Wisconsin and 700,000 in Minnesota alone.

Zdroik said he sees potential for growth in the market.

"The ice fishing market obviously isn't as big as open water, but there is more room in the ice fishing market to develop new ideas just because

it's a little bit more untapped," Zdroik said.

The BlueTipz product is assembled in Wisconsin with parts such as circuit boards, Bluetooth modules and injection-molded plastics sourced from all over the world. "We'd love to say Made in USA, but for electronics, that's just about impossible," the company says on its website.

BlueTipz manufactures only as many devices as are needed and ships them out the next day. BlueTipz have a suggested retail price of \$39.95. A two-pack has a suggested retail price of \$69.95.

"We've sold a couple thousand already," Baddeley said. The company sells its products on its website. "We get online orders every couple hours, on average," Baddeley said.

The company is talking with some large local national outdoor equipment retailers about adding BlueTipz to their ice fishing merchandise lineups.

"We're in a bunch of bait shops as well, and not just in Wisconsin and Minnesota," Baddeley said. Some of the states where BlueTipz are being sold include Montana, the Dakotas, Michigan, and Nebraska.

'Sick of cubicle life'

The idea for BlueTipz came from Zdroik's inability to stay hunkered down at a desk job in Madison.

"I got sick of the cubicle life," Zdroik, 29, said. "I really didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I loved ice fishing."

His first product, introduced in 2012, was the One Shot Skimmer. It's a

device that, in one scoop, clears slush out of a fishing hole cut into the ice on a frozen lake.

Zdroik operates the business out of Custer, in central Wisconsin. Baddeley operates out of Sector 67, a collaborative workspace for start-up businesses in Madison. They are part owners of BlueTipz along with Brad's brother, Ryan Zdroik, who lives in Stevens Point. They are using Brad Zdroik's established Deep Freeze Fishing brand of custom ice fishing equipment to market BlueTipz.

Retailers are showing interest in Deep Freeze Fishing's products. "We're gaining a lot of momentum, which is awesome," Zdroik said.

BlueTipz and Deep Freeze are totally self-funded. There are no outside investors - yet. The company would be willing to listen to any angel investors who might be interested, Zdroik said.

Old sport, new tech

People have been ice fishing for at least 1,500 years and probably longer, said Aron Crowell, an anthropologist who is Alaska director of the Arctic Studies Center, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution.

Lures that researchers have determined were used specifically for ice fishing are about 1,500 years old, he said.

"I like that we are taking the sport of ice fishing, which is centuries old, and we're taking really new technology and applying it to the sport," Baddeley said.

But melding an ancient practice with 21st-century technology has involved a few headaches, Baddeley and Zdroik said.

BlueTipz works best with the Apple iOS system. It has had a few hiccups involving the Android operating system. BlueTipz uses Bluetooth 4.0 and connects to most iOS devices and newer Android devices.

Then there are the batteries. The same thing that can happen to car batteries in extreme cold also can happen to prototypes for ice fishing equipment when the temperatures plummet.

"Every electronics product out on the ice relies on batteries," Baddeley said. "And batteries, just because of chemistry, don't perform as well when the temperature gets too cold. We have specifically chosen a battery - a lithium battery - that has the best cold performance."

The company's tests show the product can send out about 600 tip-up alerts on one battery. "Our battery life is just ridiculous," Zdroik said.

And there is the law.

"You are supposed to respond immediately to a tip-up. With this product, it helps anglers be even more immediate," Baddeley said.

"We've actually had conversations with the DNR. We're totally fine," he said.

"By no means are we developing BlueTipz so you can sit in your cottage and not watch your tip-ups at all," Zdroik said.

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